

## Travel: Marbella



The Promenade is one of the highlights of Marbella



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### Don't pack your preconceptions when you head for the Costa del Sol

Travel preconceptions can be risky. For example, the conviction that a resort in Marbella will be basking in sunshine in spring. Within moments of my arrival in the Costa del Sol I was rudely disabused of that notion. The Beast From the East

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Travel preconceptions can be risky. For example, the conviction that a resort in Marbella will be basking in sunshine in spring. Within moments of my arrival in the Costa del Sol I was rudely disabused of that notion. The Beast From the East had wrought its havoc, transforming the normally perpetually sunny spot into a panorama comparable with the west coast in mid-November.

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Old Town Marbella is full of charm

But

But disappointed expectations can also be a boon. I was braced for a raucous party town dripping with overt displays of affluence and a glitzy sheen but little authentic "Spanish-ness". I couldn't have been more wrong.



Not that there is anything wrong with a holiday wallow in high-end indulgence, but it is not an experience that everyone can afford or would even enjoy.

What is known as Marbella's Golden Mile is actually a stretch of four miles which begins at the western edge of Marbella city and ends at Puerto Banus. The area is home to some of Marbella's most luxurious villas and estates with views of mountain and sea. But just to the east of the extravagance is the compact city itself which is a delight from the mountain tops of Juanar to the sea-lapped beaches.



The Costa del Sol is a popular stop off for cruise ships, here docking in Malaga

Hugging the coast from Malaga Airport, I zoomed along the charmless coast of Andalusia on a beeline for Marbella , roughly 40 minutes' drive west. The impact of rapid and extensive tourism has allowed

unimaginative sprawl to proliferate, replacing much of the quaint fishing villages. The tourist explosion of the 1960s and 70s created a rural exodus with the workers attracted to the coastal tourism boom leading to largely unplanned development – ugly and haphazard rather than charming and higgledy-piggledy. But Marbella has managed to escape relatively unscathed.

Despite the Andalusian city becoming synonymous with Puerto Banus – described as the bastion of bling – it has managed to preserve the beauty and integrity of its historical centre. Staying at an adults-only hotel 5km east of the famed Golden Mile, I found it to be a picturesque, laid-back place, welcoming to visitors and devoid of ostentation.



Adept at tourism – the area swells by 30 per cent during the high season – the mellow Mediterranean mindset disperses any frantic frisson that could bubble between locals and tourists.

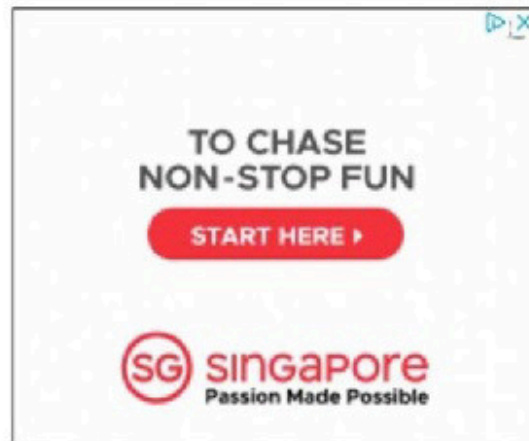
With a complex history of Roman conquest, Arab settlement and a Spanish Catholic takeover, the old town, or Casco Antiguo, is an intriguingly beautiful mix of architectural influences worth exploration. And only a few hundred metres from the beachfront, the scent of sea air follows you as you meander through the whitewashed buildings and orange-laden trees.

On an evening tour organised by the Marbella Tourism Board not even the grey skies could dampen the captivating charm of the narrow cobbled streets dripping with greenery and flowers. Around every corner are exquisitely preserved churches, plazas bursting with colour and dotted with impossible-to-avoid boutique shops, busy restaurants and even the odd “street shrine” partially surrounded by the ruins of old Arab walls.

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The original Muslim Medina in the current old town was destroyed in order to open up a new square, now called Plaza de los Naranjos, or Orange Square, and is a great place to stop and take in the surroundings.



Hints of Moorish roots are reflected in the architecture, and taken at a leisurely stroll, it is easy to become momentarily lost in the twist of winding streets. There is also an abundance of eateries from delectable bakeries to high-end restaurants.

A good way to sample the best of the beachfront with the luxury of nearby Puerto Banus is at the adults-only Amare Marbella Beach Hotel.

Less than a five-minute stroll from the buzzing Old Town and the marina, it is an ideal base from which to explore the surrounding region – with more than a hint of pamper at its heart.

And there is so much to do. Hikers and cyclists can head to the beautiful Sierra de las Nieves or La Vereda del Faro with striking landscapes such as the Mirador de los Gitanos and the Puerto de las Pitas. I took a hike up La Concha, Marbella's most famous mountain, which can be started from Juanar, about a 20-minute drive from Marbella. It is a remarkable walk. Although initially steep, the well marked paths are solid underfoot, making it a fairly straightforward route. If you don't want to walk solo, treks can be arranged with Jose Moreno through TUUR Canyoning (tuurcanyoning@gmail.com), who also run other adventure activities.

The pinnacle is a breathtaking view across the Costa del Sol and north Africa. On the descent, you ramble through a forest. Slipping from a tangle of olive groves, the path leads you through pines before becoming enveloped in tall spindly eucalyptus trees – the myriad aromas accompanying you down the rocky path take the hiker a world away from the throng of beach-dwelling sun worshippers.

Those looking to discover more at sea level can hop on a free bike from the hotel and using the complimentary cycling map to sample all the best local spots for a coffee or some retail therapy. Enjoy a leisurely bike ride along the Marbella Promenade, which is dotted with cafés and boutiques and marvel at the views of the Mediterranean.

Re-opened in 2016, the 236-bedroom Amare Marbella Beach Hotel has the only rooftop bar with 360 degree views in the whole of Marbella, live music events with resident DJs throughout the season, a superb beach club and a sensational spa.

The hotel rubs shoulders with the exquisite Michelin-starred Messina, a mere 10 metres from the front door. In a smart pair-up, as well as allowing diners to charge their restaurant bill to their hotel room, chef Mauricio Giovanini will transform the beachside venue into Marbella's first and only Latin American restaurant from mid-June to mid-September.

Marbella really has it all – if your all includes beautiful beaches, fresh seafood, mountains, the sea, shopping and a whack of history.

I didn't expect to find culture on the Costa del Sol, but that's the danger of stereotypes – don't let them obscure the lustre of this gem on the Andalusian coast.

Nightly rates at the Amare Marbella Beach Hotel start from £200 in an 'I Was Here' room on a bed and breakfast basis including complimentary daily sunbeds, use of the Technogym and wifi. Amare Marbella Beach Hotel, Av. Severo Ochoa, 8, 29603 Marbella, Málaga, Spain (+34 951 560 715, [www.amarehotels.com](http://www.amarehotels.com))

Easyjet flights from Edinburgh to Malaga cost from £68